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Let the Wheelchair Games begin

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Ric Jost was 20 years old, and addicted to heroin, when he came home from the Vietnam war. Physically he was OK, but admits he had "picked up some pretty bad habits."

One day, he went out drinking with a buddy and woke up paralyzed from the waist down.

Jost doesn't call it an accident. When you're drinking and driving, he said, "it's not an accident when you crash."

It's been more than 30 years since the crash that put him in a wheelchair. But today, at 54, he's a marathon winner who rides a hand-powered bicycle (a handcycle) about 1,000 miles a year.

Next month he'll compete in the 25th annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games, which are being held in Minnesota for the first time.

To Jost of Apple Valley this is more than just a sporting event. He credits the Wheelchair Games, which started in 1981, with turning his life around.

"I think they gave me a purpose, I really do," said Jost, who is now executive director of the Minnesota chapter of Paralyzed Veterans of America.

This year, his group is co-hosting the games with the Minneapolis Veterans Medical Center from June 27 to July 1, at sites in the Twin Cities.

The games have turned into a showcase for people such as Jost, who learned to use sports as a way to cope with their disabilities.

This year, about 600 veterans from around the country, including 30 from Minnesota, will compete in 15 sports, including wheelchair basketball, softball, track, weightlifting, cycling, and a rowdy hybrid called "quad rugby," which was nicknamed "Murderball" in a recent film.

"They take it very seriously," said Tom Brown of San Antonio, who is national director of the games. Many of the players, he said, "thought they'd never be a member of a team again because of their

disability, and all of a sudden they are a member of a team."

The games are open to any military veteran who uses a wheelchair. In practice, most are men from the Vietnam era; and more than half were injured after they left the service, according to Brown. Still, younger veterans are signing up as well, and about a dozen or so are veterans of combat in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The players are matched by level of disability, "so that competition is fair," said Brown.

Some of the most severely disabled players participate in games by puffing into a straw that controls their wheelchairs.

Just watching them can inspire others, especially those who are newly disabled, says Brown. "A lot of times our therapists in the hospitals will have to push the guys out of bed and almost drag them to the wheelchair games," he said. "But once they get out there ... they see other people with either disabilities just like they have or with more severe disabilities doing things that they should be doing or they could be doing."

For many, he said, it's "an awakening."

When the games started, in Richmond, Va., in 1981, only 74 people showed up. Ric Jost was one of them. Newly clean and sober, he decided to try his hand at track and field.

"I did lousy," he said. But he started training, and the next year won four gold medals. "[It] got me back believing I could do something with my life," he said.

He found a new career: working with veterans in outstate Minnesota; and a new love: handcycling.

Last year, he won the handcycling division of the Twin Cities Marathon. He also became a certified personal trainer and took over as executive director of the Paralyzed Veterans group in 2002.

"I owe so much of that to those games," he said. "You start believing in yourself. They have an incredible impact on somebody's life."

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